

# **An Open Letter To Landowners and Deer Hunters in Bedford, Fairfax, Fauquier, Franklin, Loudoun, Patrick, Prince William, and Roanoke Counties**

by Matt Knox and Nelson Lafon, Deer Project Leaders,  
and John Rohm, District Wildlife Biologist (Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William counties)

HELP! If you hunt deer or own property in any of the above eight counties, please read this article. We need your help to reduce deer populations in these areas.

Over the past decade, the Department's deer harvest data indicates that deer populations have demonstrated significant increases in all these areas, except Fairfax. Fairfax's deer population has also increased during this time, but at a slower rate. Higher deer populations in these areas, combined with increasing human populations, have led to increased deer-human conflicts (e.g., deer-vehicle collisions, property damage, etc.). Increased deer populations in some counties (e.g., Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William) are especially troubling considering the Department's deer management objective over the past decade has been to reduce these deer populations. Despite having some of the most liberal deer hunting regulations in the nation, deer numbers continue to increase in these areas.

Has deer hunting failed in these areas? No, but neither has it succeeded in meeting the deer population objectives. If it were not for the current level of deer hunting in these areas, deer populations and deer-human conflicts in these areas would have increased even faster.

The bottom line is that doe harvest levels have not been sufficient to reduce deer populations in these areas. Something must be done to increase doe harvest levels in these counties on a sustained annual basis. Although hunting regulation changes are often necessary, opportunity currently exists to kill sufficient numbers of does in all these areas. It is the opinion of the Department's deer management staff that hunter and landowner education could be more important than regulations in solving deer overabundance in these areas.

Although decreasing numbers of deer hunters and properties open to hunting are potential barriers to controlling deer populations, the bigger problem is that deer hunters are not shooting the "right" deer. Most hunters, given the choice, prefer to shoot an antlered buck instead of a doe. But female deer control the deer population. No one has ever controlled a deer population by shooting antlered bucks. A simple example will suffice. If one buck is killed, a single deer has been removed from the deer population. If he had survived for a decade, he would have been only a single deer a decade later. One buck can breed with a number of does, so removing the majority of bucks has little or no impact on the number of fawns born. But what about shooting a doe? If one doe is killed, a single deer has been removed from the deer population. If she had survived for a decade, however, she and her offspring could have contributed over 200 deer to the deer population. The lesson here is simple. Shooting bucks will not control deer populations; shooting does will. Deer hunters in these counties must begin shooting more does if we are going to reduce deer populations.

Will shooting more does wipe out the deer? No, but hopefully it will result in lower deer population densities, meaning fewer deer-vehicle collisions and other conflicts. White-tailed deer would continue to be an integral part of the culture and ecosystem in these areas, just at lower levels. Besides, it is estimated that it will take 3-5 years of intensive doe harvests to reduce deer populations substantially in these areas.

So why should deer hunters make this change in the way they deer hunt? The simple answer is that it is what the public wants. Deer management in Virginia has changed. For much of the past century, the Department and its constituents worked diligently to restore deer populations across the Commonwealth. This effort has been one of the most remarkable wildlife success stories of the 20th century. In Virginia, deer populations have increased from an estimated population of 25,000 deer in the early 1930s to approximately a million deer today. Today, management emphasis is on controlling deer herd growth, and, in many areas, reducing deer herds. Currently, the only economically feasible way to achieve these goals is through regulated deer hunting.

The authority to manage deer in Virginia is vested with the Department through the General Assembly and the Governor. One of the missions of the Department is to manage Virginia's wildlife to maintain optimum populations to serve the needs of the Commonwealth. Today, all citizens and interest groups must be considered in deer management, not just any one special interest group. With deer hunters in Virginia comprising less than 4% of the state's total population, it is important to also address the needs of the non-hunting majority. It is clear that the majority of citizens in counties with frequent human-deer conflicts would like to see the deer population reduced.

If the Department is not able to meet the expectations of the general public using hunting, then other deer herd reduction methods (e.g., out of season kill permits, sharpshooting) can be expected to increase. In a worst-case scenario, white-tailed deer could be declared a nuisance species and shot at any time.

In the long run, reducing the deer population will benefit the deer herd and deer hunters themselves. Deer quantity and deer quality share an inverse relationship. More deer results in smaller, less healthy deer; less deer result in bigger, healthier deer and healthier habitat.

## **Strategies For Deer Hunters:**

- ◆ First of all, be safe.
- ◆ Shoot a big doe instead of a small buck. In fact, shoot two and tell your deer hunting friends to do the same.
- ◆ Support Virginia's Hunters For The Hungry Program (donate deer and money).

## **Strategies For Landowners:**

- ◆ If conceivable, permit deer hunting that promotes harvest of does.
- ◆ Only allow deer hunters who agree to assist in reducing the deer herd.
- ◆ Favor hunters who hunt during all seasons (i.e., archery, muzzle-loading, and modern firearms).
- ◆ Adopt an "earn a buck" program and require that at least two does be killed for every antlered buck killed.

For more information on the Department's deer management program(s), please visit the Department's Web site at [www.dgif.virginia.gov](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov).